The Fourth Church Pulpit

LOVE'S FINAL TRIUMPH

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Palm Sunday

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Matthew 21:1-11, Philippians 2:1-11

"Let the same mind be among you that was in Christ Jesus, who . . . emptied himself. . . ."
Philippians 2:5, 7

There are few things more compelling to me than a parade. When I hear the sound of a marching band in the distance I consider, momentarily at least, dropping what I am doing and running to see what is happening.

And so, who doesn't love this day . . . this Sunday of the Palms? Who could resist the shouting and cheering and singing when Jesus ordered his friends to bring him a donkey and rode it the few remaining miles into Jerusalem on the first day of the week of Passover?

For more than a thousand years, the church has been reading a supplemental lesson on this day. . . . It provides a theological counterpoint to the celebration.

It was written by St. Paul — probably around 55 A.D. in Philippi. . .

> "If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, and sharing in the Spirit, and compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete; be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Why that lesson on this day, the occasion of our Lord's single triumphant victorious moment? Why self-emptying, servanthood, humble obedience to death, in the middle of this lovely occasion with the little children waving palm branches and the crowds welcoming Jesus? Why rain on the only parade in his short and tragic life?

The reason is self-evident if you know the rest of the story. This is actually a very confusing occasion. It's always confusing for the preacher and the people. You don't know whether to be happy or sad, exhilarated or ashamed. Christians are never sure whether to laugh or cry on Palm Sunday and it is, I think, appropriate to do a little of both. We like the parade, of course; there are few moments in the life of this particular church that touch us as deeply as the Palm Sunday processional with our beautiful children singing and filling our chancel with waving palm branches.

But as soon as the parade is over and the cheering stops, he gets down to business, and so must we. It is not, finally, a lovely occasion. Rather it is better described as a powerfully important occasion, a moment of truth, when Jesus makes decisions which will eventuate in his arrest and death — in five short days no less. It is a day to remember that within those five days the crowd which welcomed him to Jerusalem will be turned against him and worked into a fever pitch by a potent combination with which we are distressingly familiar these days: religious fanaticism — radical patriotism, alone and frequently together, the formula for violent terrorism, by the IRA or the Muslim Fundamentalists, or the lunatic fringe of the anti-abortion movement. This crowd will turn, between Sunday and Friday, on one of its own sons and demand his execution. It will take just five days for "Hossana" to become "Crucify Him!" The fact that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified in the name of religious orthodoxy and political correctness, law and order, and orthodox morality, always makes me a little uneasy on Palm Sunday.

But what touches me most about this day is his courage and intentionality. It did not have to turn out the way it did. He did not have to come to the city, did not have to ride in on a donkey and in that act remind the crowds of Passover celebrants that their liberations had not yet come, that the prophet had promised the arrival of their king on the back of a beast like that. He did not have to go to the Temple and interrupt the profitable commerce and challenge orthodox piety so directly. He did not have to do any of this and those who loved him must have begged him not to and to stop, and once he started, begged him to turn back for God's sake, to not throw your life away when you could simply walk back down the steep road from Jerusalem and back all the way to the pleasant rolling hills of Galilee and be a carpenter and teach whatever you want to teach in the Synagogue, and find a wife and have a family and give your mother the grandchildren she wants. Can't you hear them? "Don't do it Jesus! Don't throw your life away."

I am moved by this day because it doesn't have to end at the cross. It is a mistake to regard him as a naive Rabbi in from the farm who becomes the unwitting victim of big city politics and intrigue and violence. Jesus, I believe, knows what is happening — knows how it will probably end. There is a sense in which he, more than any of the other actors in this drama — more than the religious leaders, the politicians, even his followers — he, more than any of them, is in control. He is doing what he believes God calls him to do. He is, at some level deep in his spirit, obeying what he hears God's voice telling him. He is, I believe, acting out of love because it is only for love that life is given away. This is his moment of trial and faith. And it is absolutely captivated by that line St. Paul wrote about him — surely with this day in mind:

"He emptied himself . . . humbled himself . . . became obedient to the point of death."

It is our most difficult belief. We can deal with the possibility that Jesus was victim: that the world always kills its best . . . Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcom X . . . and Dantrell Davis and all the children. We know about victims of urban violence. We can feel the injustice of it, the anger. But it is difficult, is it not, to deal with the possibility that his behavior and his dying is more than a travesty of human justice? That it is, in fact, an insight into the nature of God. That is our most demanding theological assertion. . . namely that the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth is the one event that reveals God to the human race — most clearly, most eloquently.

Who needs a religion like that? John Baillie, a beloved Scots theologian wrote:

> "The Christian religion would have aroused much less opposition in the world if it had left out its emphasis on sorrow and suffering and death and spoken only of life and joy and peace: if it had offered Easter without Lent and Good Friday. But a religion that deliberately chooses a gallows tree for its coat of arms, what do (we) want with that?" [*A Reasoned Faith*, p. 154]

We have enough trouble trying to make some sense of human suffering, how in the world can we cope with the notion that God's son voluntarily suffers; that in that act, the great and terrible drama of Good Friday, this God suffers?

German theologian Juergan Moltman wrote a book, *The Crucified God,* in which he said:

> "Christians who do not have the feeling that they must flee the crucified Christ have probably not yet understood him in a sufficiently radical way." [p. 38]

The God Jesus Christ taught about and revealed in his life and death, is a God who loves totally, without reservation: a God who does not love from a distance, in the abstract, but who enters human life, becomes vulnerable to human life, subject to life's ecstasy and tragedy; a God who — in the life of this one, this obedient servant — dies to demonstrate love and to show what human life is about.

The demanding assertion of Christian faith, which is frequently ignored, or hidden in our effort to be successful and popular and pleasant and appealing — the assertion is that this act of love — this dying shows us what God is, and at the same time, shows us how to live.

And that, I would submit, sets us quite apart, and stands in dramatic contrast to the world.

Who would dare propose that it is in dying that we live — and in giving we receive?

Who, after all, would dare suggest that the way to live fully is to stop worrying about living fully and start living for someone or something else? Christopher Lasch has written a lot about our culture's commitment to happiness through self-discovery, self-realization, self-actualization, and why it doesn't make people happy.

Lasch observes:

> "Love as self-sacrifice or self-abasement, submission to a higher loyalty — these strike (us) as intolerably oppressive, offensive to common sense and injurious to personal health and well-being. To 'liberate' humanity from such outmoded ideas of love and duty has become (our) mission . . . particularly those popularizers — for whom mental health means the non-stop celebration of the self." ["The Narcissistic Society" in Parker Palmer, *The Company of Strangers,* p. 75/76]

It was only a few years ago that legendary investment banker, Ivan Boesky, in a commencement address at the University of California Berkley Business School said:

> "Greed is all right. I want you to know that. I think greed is healthy. You can be greedy and still feel good about yourself."

James Stewart reports in his best seller, *Den of Thieves,* that the students and crowd laughed and burst into applause.

Boesky and a lot of others went to jail, not for being greedy, but for breaking the law. But for a moment, cultural values, applauded and cheered by the business community and most of the press, were seen with a terrible clarity . . . and those values are not about self-emptying, serving, giving.

Sometimes the values of the culture shape the values expressed by religion. Is that not exactly what transpired in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago?

In the *Time Magazine* cover article this week, "The Generation That Forgot God," Richard Ostling describes current church efforts to be "market conscious": to provide for people's wants and needs. Ostling quotes a Catholic scholar, Avery Dulles:

> "Just about everything in America, religion included, succeeds to the extent that it arouses interest and provides entertainment."

And, an Evangelical scholar, David Wells, observing current marketing gimmicks in religion like the church that displays a giant teddy bear behind the pulpit:

> "Biblical truth is being edged out by the small and tawdry interest of the self in itself." [*Time Magazine,* 4/5/93, p. 46 ff.]

Christianity has a radical, counter-culture suggestion to make. It is that the best way to fill yourself is to empty yourself: the surest way to find the meaning of your life is to start devoting your life to other people: the way to be happy is not to hoard your life, holding on to it tightly, squeezing it for all you're worth, but to let it go, to open your hands, and give it away.

In Dan Wakefield's best-seller, *Returning,* he tells a remarkable story of his spiritual journey. After a series of painful reversals in his life he set out to find himself and entered analysis with, he said, "the high seriousness of purpose and commitment of any acolyte taking his vows to a rigorous religious order." It didn't seem to work. At the same time he was living in Spanish Harlem doing research for a new book, and on the side, doing a little volunteer work. He met Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement and volunteered to work in a soup kitchen.

He writes:

> "I had gone into psychoanalysis to save myself, and went to Spanish Harlem in the hope of helping others. Looking back from the vantage point of thirty years, it seems quite clear in a literal way that what I did to save myself didn't work, and what I did in the hope of helping others, nourished and sustained me and maybe even saved my life." [p. 178]

Wakefield recalls waking up in a friend's apartment with a hangover and stumbling through the rooms reading the posters on the wall. One of them changed his life. It was from Albert Schweitzer who Wakefield regarded as "a boring German Jesus-freak." Schweitzer had said:

> "I don't know what your destiny will be but one thing I know, the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve." [*Returning,* p. 201]
>
> "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," Paul wrote... "who emptied himself."

Parents know what that means. It means giving your heart to your child. It means putting your child before your own wants, your own needs even.

It is a mother who gives her life to her mentally handicapped son.

It is a friend daily bathing and tending to a person with AIDS.

. . . the man who cares for his aging parents.

. . . the woman who stops everything to be with her friend who needs her.

It is bright, motivated, promising men and women who decide to be urban school teachers.

It is fire fighters, police — putting life on the line and sometimes dying.

It is thousands of men and women who give time to good causes: tutoring youngsters, helping in hospitals, schools, jails, clinics, giving a little bit of life away so others can live.

God blesses that, we believe, because it expresses something of the truth and beauty and reality of our humanity.

Is it merely another scheme, a pious project to feel better about yourself: "Give now and receive tomorrow"? No. The secret here is self-emptying, forgetting about self and giving to others, forgetting even about the obvious rewards which come to those who serve.

The secret is in the meaning of this confusing day: this temporary triumph that leads to the crucifixion . . . the final triumph of love.

The story of Palm Sunday is not tragic so much as it is heroic. It is about a man so in love with God that he gives his life away. It is about a God who so loves the world that life is given; a God who descends to live among us, and knows our humanness and feels our pain and dies our death.

The cross of Jesus Christ, where the story of Palm Sunday leads, is the supreme mark of our faith. It stands on that lonely hill as a reminder that there is nowhere we can go that God has not gone before; nothing we can experience that God has not experienced, no grief or loneliness or pain that has not been felt in God's own heart.

The shadow of the cross falls into your life and mine to remind us of a love that emptied itself on our behalf . . . a dying that was for us. But it is also an invitation to initiate it: to find some way to live like that. If you and I don't love enough to suffer . . . love enough to be willing to die . . . a little bit or a lot . . . we're not lucky, we're miserable. If we don't love enough to die, we're not yet alive.

That's why Jesus did what he did — came to the city . . . suffered and died.

It was for the love of God, and for the love of you and me.

Let that into your life this week. Let it disturb you, challenge you, maybe even change you.

Amen.